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ABSTRACT

This position paper offers a response to the National Assessment of Educational Progress's (NAEP) 1998 Civics Report Card to the nation. The paper lists the following major points: the NAEP findings are ground for concern, calling for action to remedy a serious deficiency in the education of citizens; failure of students to do well on the NAEP study is a direct consequence of the widespread lack of adequate curricular requirements, teacher preparation, and instruction in civics and government; good programs in civics and government produce good results and are the solution to the shortcomings identified in the NAEP results; and there is a need for a national campaign to insure that effective instruction in civics and government is provided to every student in every school in the nation. (BT)

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Center for Civic Education

Response to Findings of the NAEP 1998
Civics Report Card to the Nation

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Major Points

- The NAEP findings are grounds for concern. They call for action to remedy a serious deficiency in the education of American citizens.
- Failure of students to do well on the NAEP study is a direct consequence of the widespread lack of adequate curricular requirements, teacher preparation, and instruction in civics and government.
- Good programs in civics and government produce good results. They are the solution to the shortcomings identified in the NAEP results.
- There is a need for a national campaign to insure that effective instruction in civics and government is provided to every student in every school in the nation.

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Introduction

The good news in the NAEP civics report card is that about 25 percent of our nation's students performed at the proficient or advanced level on the civics assessment. This is good news to many of us who have been working in the field of civic education for the past thirty odd years because we thought the number would be lower. The news that should concern us all, however, is that about 75 percent of our students at the 4th, 8th, and 12th grade levels performed at below basic (30 to 35 percent) and basic (39 to 48 percent) levels. Further, according to the NAEP report, "the basic level is not the desired goal, but rather represents partial mastery that is a step towards *Proficient.* "

The findings are not surprising. They are consistent with those of other studies of the knowledge of American youth about politics and government that have been conducted in recent years. Add to these findings the results of studies of the participation of our young people in the political life of their communities and nation and we have a picture of large numbers of our youth as being ill-informed about their government and not participating in it. A study entitled the "New Millennium Project" commissioned by the National Association of Secretaries of State found that in the last presidential election less than 20% of eligible voters between the ages of 18-25 bothered to vote. The same study revealed that 94% of our youth believe that "the most important thing I can do as a citizen is to help others." This is an admirable sentiment but it is also a conception of the role and responsibilities of citizenship that is totally inadequate in a nation that is supposed to have a government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The findings are not surprising for another reason. Suppose the NAEP study had been designed to determine how well our students could read, write, and speak Hungarian. Would anyone be surprised at the inevitable findings? No one expects our students to be proficient in Hungarian because it is not taught in our schools.

Suppose, however, that Hungarian was taught for one semester at the twelfth grade level and that was the only time most students received instruction devoted exclusively to the subject. Would they become proficient? Hungarian might also be integrated into world history classes or "infused" into social studies classes at elementary and middle school levels. Would that be likely to improve their performance?

I have stretched this analogy somewhat, but I would like to make the claim that this is pretty much the way civics is treated in far too many of our schools. We recognize that important and complex subjects such as mathematics, science, history, and language arts should be taught rigorously and with increasing sophistication from the elementary through the secondary years of school. Yet, we do not do this with civics and government. The vast majority of our students are simply not getting an adequate education in civics and government so their lack of proficiency should come as no surprise.

In response to the NAEP findings the noted scholar R. Freeman Butts has commented, "I agree that the results are not too surprising, but in any event they are deplorable, worse than "not satisfactory"...the civics findings should trumpet a national alert that is even more disturbing than the weaknesses in other academic subjects. For our citizenship itself is at stake."

I will address three major topics in responding to the NAEP findings. They are (1) the inadequacy of existing curricular requirements and instruction, (2) the fact that research shows that good civics programs produce good results, and (3) the need for a national movement to see that education in civics and government is accorded the place in the curricula of our schools it deserves.

1. Inadequate curricular requirements, teacher preparation, and instruction in civics and government

One of the major reasons our students did not do well on the NAEP study is that the vast majority are either not being taught civics and government at all or they are being taught too little, too late, and inadequately. Under these conditions, you can hardly expect them to do well on such a test.

One of the major reasons why civics is not taught adequately is that most of our states and school districts do not have sufficient requirements for instruction in civics and government.

With the assistance of more than 150 of our colleagues around the country the Center for Civic Education (Center) has developed the following standards that we think should guide the development of educational policy on civic education in every state and school district in the nation. We believe that

- Education in civics and government should not be incidental to the schooling of American youth but a central purpose of education essential to the well being of American constitutional democracy.

- Civics and government should be considered a subject on a level with other subjects. Civics and government, like history and geography, is an integrative and interdisciplinary subject.

- Civics and government should be taught explicitly and systematically from kindergarten through twelfth grade either as separate units and courses or as readily identifiable parts of courses in other subjects.

- Effective instruction in civics and government should include attention to the content of the discipline as well as to the essential skills, principles, and values required for full participation in and reasoned commitment to our democratic system.

We are not aware of any state or school district that meets these standards. To find out more about state policies and practices in civic education our Center commissioned a study by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. The following is a brief summary of some of the major findings of that study.

- **State Constitutions**. Thirteen (13) states' constitutions explicitly affirm that an informed citizenry is a worthwhile goal by mandating public education or otherwise promoting education. However, no constitutional provisions specifically require instruction in citizenship, government, rights, or liberties.

- **State Statutes**. Twenty-six (26) states have enacted state laws specifically related to civic education. These statutes are of four types [note: a few states have more than one type]:

  - statutes that require instruction in civics but do not require specific courses, standards, or assessments, leaving the details to regulatory authorities, school districts, or schools (11 states);

  - statutes that require some form of civics assessment or the specification of civics content in state standards (5 states);

  - statutes that require specific courses in civics, government, constitutions, or related topics, often mandating not only the instruction topic but also the year and length of the course(s) (10 states); and

- statutes that relate to civic education but do not fit any of the other three categories (e.g., statutes that fund civic education curricula, authorize community service in schools, or require a state clearinghouse for information on character and citizenship education programs) (7 states).

- **State Standards**. States address civics topics in their state academic standards in one of three ways:

  - by adopting separate civics standards (3 states);

  - by including civics topics as an explicit section in social studies standards (23 states); and

  - by integrating civics content in social studies standards (18 states, including the District of Columbia).

  In spring 1999, 5 more states were planning to incorporate civics topics in their state standards; 1 state plans no standards with civics content; and 1 state plans no academic content standards in any subjects.

- **State Requirements for High School Civics/Government Course**. Twenty-nine (29) states (including the District of Columbia) reported requiring that students complete one or more high school courses in civics/government. Only five of these states require a 12th grade "capstone" course.

- **State Assessments of Civics Topics.** Thirty-one (31) states reported testing civics topics, with 11 more states (including the District of Columbia) expecting to institute new tests soon. Only 3 of the 31 states reported having a separate, stand-alone civics test, however; in the other 28 states, the civics topics are included in other state assessments. In 15 of the 31 states, student failure on these tests prevents high school graduation; in 2 of the 15 states, failure also prevents promotion.

- **State Certification to Teach Civics Topics**. Thirteen (13) states reported offering certification in civics or government (or both) for high school teachers, with 10 states offering certification in civics or government for middle school or junior high school teachers. The most common state certification for teachers of civics topics is a broad history and social studies certification, although 3 states reported requiring only a general teaching certification. Twenty-three (23) states reported requiring teachers to pass some kind of standardized test of their civics knowledge before being certified to teach civics content.

- **State Professional Development for Teachers of Civics Topics**. Twenty-one (21) states reported requiring professional development for teachers of civics topics. State-level in-service programs and conferences, university courses to refresh and update knowledge of civics topics, and training through community organizations (e.g., law-related education associations or offices) are among the professional development opportunities offered in 18 or more states.

- **Statewide Community Service Programs**. Three (3) states reported having a community service program requirement for all students; 8 other states reported having statewide voluntary programs.

- **Promoting Civic Intellectual Skills in State Social Studies Standards.** State social studies standards that promote students' use of higher-order thinking skills foster the development of students' civic intellectual skills. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics framework categorizes these skills "as *identifying and describing*, *explaining and analyzing*, and *defending* positions on public issues." These categories correspond, respectively, to basic knowledge and comprehension skills, application and analysis skills, and the advanced synthesis and

evaluation skills of importance to citizens. Whereas the 1998 NAEP civics assessment test items are distributed across these three skills categories as 25 percent, 40 percent, and 35 percent, respectively, the mean percentages of state social studies standards' civics statements associated with these three categories are 31 percent, 47 percent, and 22 percent, respectively. Thus, on average, the civics content in state standards over emphasizes the lower-order civic intellectual skills relative to the higher-order skills. Only 6 states' standards give a greater percentage of attention to the highest-order civic intellectual skills than is given in the NAEP framework (i.e., 35 percent), while in 7 states' standards less than 10 percent of the civic intellectual skills are of the highest order.

These policies clearly do not meet the standards we have outlined above.

The question arises, regardless of the policies just described, what is actually happening in the schools? One study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 78.1 percent of high school graduates in 1994 had at least a 45-60 minute course at least once a day for half a year under the general heading "American Government and Politics." The 1988 NAEP study in civics found that, by their own estimates, 90 percent of students had received a half a year's study of civics or government or more by the end of their senior year. Comparison with transcript data, however, suggests the students slightly overestimated the number of courses they had taken. Students also receive some instruction in civics in their courses in American history, but it is difficult to determine the quality and extent of exposure that is provided. It appears, moreover, that most instruction at the secondary level focuses on descriptions of governmental institutions and omits development of an understanding of the fundamental principles and values of democratic government that provides the necessary context for a proper understanding of those institutions, contemporary issues, and political life.

I am not aware of studies of elementary instruction similar to the above. A review of course outlines and requirements compiled by the Council of State Social Studies Specialists reveals little attention devoted specifically to civics at the elementary level. Civics is usually "infused" in the social studies curriculum which means, more often than not, it is not treated rigorously, sequentially, or systematically.

Students gain some knowledge about politics and government from other subjects, the media, and merely by living in their communities. Fortunately, they are socialized into a democratic political culture from which they unconsciously assimilate democratic behaviors and values. Anyone familiar with students and adults who have been socialized in authoritarian or totalitarian systems will recognize the debt Americans owe to their inheritance. However, learning about politics and government by socialization without examination and reflection is not adequate preparation for participation in our complex political system which can be bewildering to the ill-informed.

Given the evidence that there is some attention to civics and government in our schools and that many secondary students do take at least a one semester course in civics and government, why do these students perform so poorly on the NAEP test? Four reasons come to mind.

- **Inadequate teacher preparation and inadequate instruction.** A thoughtful high school government teacher recently took a four-week summer institute on the history of American political thought conducted by our Center at the University of California at Los Angeles. When he completed the course he said that he wished he could bring back all of the students he had taught over the past thirteen years so he could disabuse them of many of the misconceptions he had given them.

  Several years ago our Center conducted a small study to determine how well teachers of high school government courses could explain fifty-five key concepts in their field such as popular sovereignty, habeas corpus, judicial review, federalism, checks and balances, and the

exclusionary rule. More than fifty percent of the teachers who took part in the study could not give adequate explanations of many of these key concepts.

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 1996 that more than half of all students in history and world civilization classes are being taught by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history. No data currently are available on the subject matter qualifications of teachers of civics and government, but it is reasonable to assume that the numbers of teachers with majors or minors in political science or allied fields would be even fewer. I have little doubt that a study of the preparation of elementary teachers to teach civics would show it to be far less.

Teacher expertise has been shown to be one of the most important factors in raising student achievement. One study found that nearly 40 percent of the differences in student test scores were attributable to differences in teacher expertise, as measured by college degrees, years of teaching experience, and scores on teacher licensing examinations.

- **Emphasis on institutions and current events without providing a framework of fundamental democratic values and principles required for understanding and decision making.** It is common for instruction in civics courses to focus upon memorization of the basic workings of government and governmental institutions and/or discussion of current events. While this may be important, what often is lacking is the development of an understanding of the philosophical foundations, values, and principles of our democratic institutions and processes. Such an understanding is necessary in order to, for example, comprehend the reasons for institutional arrangements, provide a frame of reference for dealing intelligently with current events, and provide a set of standards for participating in the political life of one's community.

- **Lack of sequential development of the subject.** Even when students do receive instruction in civics over a number of years, it is often repetitive and does not progress sequentially from basic treatment to an increasingly sophisticated treatment of the subject.

- **Methodology.** Democracy requires citizens with the capacity to inquire, evaluate, advocate, and defend positions on civic matters. Democratic citizens must also learn how to monitor and influence their government in the many ways that are available to them. Development of these capacities requires both attention to appropriate content and the use of methodologies that bring the subject to life and help students develop the necessary intellectual and participatory skills. There are many skilled teachers who do provide their students the kinds of educational experiences that enable them to develop such capacities. Unfortunately, such teachers are in the minority.

2. Good programs in civics and government produce good results

There is ample evidence that when students are taught well they gain valuable knowledge and skills, they develop reasoned commitments to fundamental values of American constitutional democracy, and they are more likely to participate in political life. For example, the following anecdote was reported by a civic educator from the State of Alabama. It illustrates what can be done by good teachers working with good programs and the support of their administrators and community.

> "Sixth graders at Bryan Elementary School in Morris, Alabama taking part in a civics project tried to get a traffic light installed at a busy intersection near their school. What they thought was a simple task turned out to involve the local city council and police department, the county sheriff's office, the county planning office, the state department of transportation, and other agencies. The students completed their project and presented their recommendations to their city

council and police chief. They were promised the light by a certain date. However, when it was not installed at that time, the students developed a lobbying plan and called the officials every week until the light was finally installed.

Several months later, the county commission announced its intention to build a new jail close to Bryan Elementary School on Turkey Creek and area that the students used as an outdoor science laboratory. Their parents objected to the building of the jail so close to their school. They tried a number of approaches and received a lot of media attention but had very little effect on the county commission.

Then the parents realized they already had "practiced experts in the political process" in their homes, and they began talking with their children about how to influence their county commission. The parents then talked with their children's teachers and obtained copies of the *Project Citizen* textbook their children had been using.

Advised by their children, the parents got organized. The "angry voters" began turning into "an educated citizenry," county commissioners started turning up at public meetings (instead of ignoring or insulting the parents who came to county commission meetings), and...the jail project was cancelled.

In an interesting additional twist, the students' interest in Turkey Creek skyrocketed and last spring six Bryan classes took part in a field day at the creek, doing trash cleanup, and environmental impact studies."

There are numerous anecdotes such as the one above that illustrate what can be accomplished by knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers. There are also research findings that confirm the potential of civic education conducted by such groups as the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Street Law, Close-Up, and the Center for Civic Education. The following is a brief summary of several studies of the effects of these programs.

- **Studies of student knowledge**

  - **ETS studies.** Three studies by Education Testing Service (ETS) found that students enrolled in the Center's **We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution** program at upper elementary, middle, and high school levels "significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken."

    Even more impressive were the findings of a subsequent test in which ETS compared scores of a random sample of 900 high school students who studied the **We the People...** program with 280 sophomores and juniors in political science courses at a major university. The high school students outperformed the university students in every topic area and on almost every test item. The greatest difference was in the area of political philosophy where the participating high school students scored 14 percent higher than the university students.

  - **Indiana University study.** A study conducted by the Social Studies Development Center at Indiana University concludes that students using the Center's *With Liberty and Justice for All* textbook and participating in the **We the People...** program learn more about and develop greater understanding of the Bill of Rights than students in government and civics classes using other programs.

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- **Constitutional Rights Foundation Study.** The Constitutional Rights Foundation is deeply involved in the development of service learning in which youth service to school, neighborhood, and community is linked to the civic education curriculum. Studies of the Foundation's program conducted by Brandeis University and UCLA demonstrate increases in teacher and student understanding of and increased knowledge of how to achieve change in their communities as well as significant increases in teachers' use of interactive classroom methodology.

- **Studies of participation**

  - **Clark County Schools.** In a study conducted in Clark County, Nevada, 80 percent of seniors participating in the Center's **We the People...** program registered to vote compared with the school wide average of 37 percent, confirming what educators taking part in the **We the People...** program have consistently observed: their students become more interested in political and civic life and in participating in government.

- **Studies of political altitudes**

  - **Professor Richard Brody, Stanford University.** A study of the effects on political tolerance of the Center's *We the People...*curriculum was conducted by Professor Richard Brody of Stanford University. Professor Brody found that students involved in the Center's **We the People...** .program displayed more political tolerance and felt more politically effective than most adult Americans and most other students. Findings reveal that these students exhibited more political tolerance in a number of ways including (1) placing fewer restrictions on the press, speech, and the advocacy of radical or unorthodox ideas; (2) being more willing to grant freedom of assembly to groups with diverse opinions; (3) placing fewer restrictions on due process; and (4) displaying a willingness to grant others wide latitude to speak and act politically.

    Another important finding from this study is that the more involved a student is in the **We the People...**program's competitive hearings, the more politically tolerant he or she is likely to become. Participating students are more likely to support the right to freedom of assembly to unpopular groups and to extend due process and freedom of expression rights to groups and individuals that are "odd" and/or "threatening."

  - **Close-Up study**. Research of programs of the Close-Up Foundation suggests that students who become engaged in issues-centered instruction are likely to become more interested in the political arena, develop a greater sense of political efficacy and confidence, and become more interested and knowledgeable about the issues they have studied. Students in Close-Up programs report they feel more "connected" as a result of their experiences that help to demystify and humanize politics and politicians. Students report that they now know "the steps to take to influence law and politics."

3. National campaign to promote effective instruction in civics and government

There is a need to ensure that all students in the United States receive the kind of instruction in civics and government that will enable them to participate competently and responsibly in the governance of their nation. The accomplishment of this goal requires policy support at national, state, and local levels. To gain this policy support requires a national movement of concerned educators, parents, and others who find the current situation unacceptable.

The idea that American schools have a distinctly civic mission is not new. It has been recognized since the earliest days of the Republic. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and other Founders realized that the establishment of well-designed political institutions was not in itself a sufficiently strong foundation to maintain constitutional democracy. The forefathers of America knew that ultimately a free society must depend on its citizens-on their knowledge, skills, and civic virtues. The Founders believed that the civic mission of the schools is to foster the qualities of mind and heart required for a successful government within a constitutional democracy.

The American public still believes that schools have a civic mission and that education for good citizenship should be a school's top priority. The 28th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, conducted in 1996, asked respondents what they considered to be the most important purpose of the nation's schools, apart from providing a basic education. The goal of a school considered "very important" by more people than any other goal was "to prepare students to be responsible citizens." When Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup conducted a follow-up poll of teachers the results were very similar, 84% of America's teachers said, "to prepare students for responsible citizenship" was "very important," while another 15% called it "quite important."

Under the leadership of Secretary Richard Riley, the Department of Education has provided significant support for civic education. This has included funding of the NAEP civics assessment and innovative programs in civics and government in schools throughout the nation. Other agencies of the federal government also have supported civic education. These include the United States Information Agency (now integrated with the State Department), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the Department of Justice, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. None of these programs, however, could have been accomplished without the support on both sides of the aisle of the U.S. Congress.

The federal government can play a leadership and catalytic role in promoting the improvement of civic education in our nation's schools. In our decentralized system of education, however, the major burden of providing our youth a sufficient civic education lies at the state and local levels where much work needs to be done.

The Center for Civic Education, with the assistance of many of our colleagues, has taken the first steps to launch a national campaign to promote education in civics and government in our schools. We are focusing first upon state legislatures and state departments of education in an effort to get them to establish policy support, curricular standards, and curricular requirements in civic education that meet the standards we have set forth above. We also are working with local school systems. Although our resources are limited, we do have the support of a national network of educators and volunteers who are committed to the goal. The National Conference of State Legislatures supports improvements in civic education. Other prominent groups that have recently focused on the need for improved civic education include the National Commission for Civic Renewal, the National Association of Secretaries of State, the Compact for Learning and Citizenship of the Education Commission of the States, and the National Council for the Social Studies

We need state and local policy establishing time requirements for civic education at the elementary level and specific course requirements at middle and secondary school levels. We also need policy requiring that civic education be appropriately addressed in related courses such as history, economics, language arts, science, and mathematics. The standards presented earlier in this paper should guide the development of educational policy in civic education at state and local levels. We are also collecting examples of legislation that may be useful as models and we will soon be developing model legislative language. All of these materials will be available on the Center's web site at <www.civiced.org>.

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Aristotle said, "If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in a democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost." This statement conveys an important thought, but I would like to add something to it. What is missing from Aristotle's statement is the idea that participation alone is not enough. We need to develop enlightened participation and the best way to do that is through effective civic education. Our task should be to develop the student's capacity to participate competently and responsibly. This includes fostering among our students a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Thus prepared, they should have the capacity and the inclination to work together to preserve our democratic heritage, and narrow the gap between our ideals and reality.

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